

## SLOW DANCES

*audio-essay transcript*

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The Sarabande is a slow dance that Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) included as a meditative middle movement in each of his six Suites for Cello. Written around 1720 in Köthen Germany in the midst of the so-called Age of the Enlightenment, Bach's cello suites are now viewed by many as the foundation of the solo cello repertoire. When I was young and learning the cello suites for the first time, all I wanted to do was luxuriate in the rolled chords and harmonic intricacies of the Sarabandes. I'd play them especially slowly, letting the phrases float out of time, capacious breaths opening up within the movements' short structures.

But this scene of childhood reverie gets more fraught with a little historical attention: in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, before the Sarabande became a slow dance associated with the white propertied leisure classes of the European courts and used as a template for instrumental music by Bach, it was a fast popular dance often pejoratively associated with non-white Europeans and colonized subjects. It seems that part of the reason for this association was a certain ambiguity about the dance's place of origin. There are mentions of the Sarabande in 16<sup>th</sup> century texts from Spain, such as in the works of Miguel Cervantes and Lope de Vega, and the Spanish colonies in what are now Guatemala and Mexico, particularly in Diego Durán's *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España*, but it is unclear whether the Sarabande originated in Spain or whether it was indigenous to the Americas and later expropriated to Europe.<sup>1</sup> What *is* clear is that before the Sarabande was absorbed by white Europeans and slowed down in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, it had been extremely popular and yet simultaneously described as obscene, barbarous, improper, shameless, disgraceful, licentious, raucous, wild, demoniacal, saucy, and sinful.<sup>2</sup> As any critical reader of European history will recognize, this is a repertoire of adjectives that, regardless of where the Sarabande originated, are overwhelmingly associated with the sexualization, racialization, and exotification of non-European subjects. It is an adjectival chain in a discourse that characterizes colonized and non-white subjects as non-civilized or irrational in order to justify empire, exploitation, and extermination.

While many contemporary cellists would like to approach Bach's suites as some kind of benign universal sonic substance over which we can all connect (as if connection was all we needed), they are in actuality pieces of music that occupy a fraught symbolic space between Europe and its others, the metropole and the colonies, the Age of Enlightenment and the Age of Empire. This colonial history of sexualized and racialized deprecation followed by a whitewashed absorption is the historical inheritance we continue to slow dance our way through as we perform these pieces.

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<sup>1</sup> The exact location of origin of the Sarabande has been a site of debate for musicologists and historians in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. For example, see Robert Stevenson's "The First Dated Mention of the Sarabande" from *Journal of American Musicological Society* (1952) and Rossman Palfrey and Azamat A. Akbarov's "The Early Sarabande and Chaconne: Media Lingua, Stereotypes, and Etymological Speculation Relating to African Dance and Literature in Colonial and Imperial Spain" from *Belgrade English Language and Literature Studies* (2015).

<sup>2</sup> This list is drawn from the entries on the Sarabande found in *The International Encyclopedia of Dance* and *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.

Over the past month or so, I've started a process of collaborating remotely with six dance artists—Anh Vo, Tess Dworman, Niall Jones, Tara Aisha Willis, nibia pastrana santiago, and Moriah Evans—to excavate this history. I wanted to think carefully about the politics of these pieces but approach thought as an experimental relational activity. I wanted to stay in touch with a group of artists I respect while a global pandemic was keeping us from touching. I wanted to find mediums and languages to make alongside each other while most aspects of the world of live performance were indefinitely suspended.

To begin I sent them each a version of the following email:

Dear \_\_\_\_

I'm starting to work on a project called Slow Dances that turns to the middle movements from J.S. Bach's Solo Cello Suites -- all based on a 16th century dance form called the Sarabande with a fraught colonial history -- as a way to experiment with sound, movement, history, politics, and collaboration.

I want to start grappling with the central questions of the piece by beginning a conversation with movement artists, dancers, and choreographers. I'm imagining a three-part process over these next couple of weeks:

1. I send you a little questionnaire for you to respond to however you want
2. I respond to your responses with some thoughts and a recording of me playing one of the Sarabandes.
3. We have one Zoom session that is at least partially recorded and relates in some way back to the questions from the questionnaire and the Sarabande that I sent you.

All in all, very open ended and informal and I can pay you \$75 dollars for participating. How does all this sound? Any interest?

xo  
Ethan

After they each said yes, I emailed them the following eleven questions:

what is a sexy dance?  
what is a slow dance?  
what happens when you slow down a sexy dance?  
what is empire as a dance?  
what is whiteness as a dance?  
what is virtuosity?  
what is collaboration?  
what is appropriation?  
which came first, sound or gesture? what determines what, sound or gesture?

what's something from your childhood that you are attached to even though you now know better than to be attached to it?  
what should we do with old white things?

In response to “what is a sexy dance?”, Niall wrote, “cruising. an accumulating atmosphere of attention, of desire, that rearranges proximities between bodies and the uncertainties of longing.”

In response to “what is a slow dance?”, nibia wrote, “waking up in the morning is the slowest sequence of movements, they are filled with dread and resistance of duty/ being injured also produces a kind of slow-dance, the limits of lack of mobility/ a slow dance can also be inspired by the movement of the tongue.”

In response to “what is empire?”, Moriah wrote, “empire is always danced as bodies are socially scripted and forever part of regimes and empire is inscribed and projected onto them, even when they use dance as a means to try to escape empire.”

In response to “what is collaboration?”, Tess wrote, “a safe way for people to play out codependent patterns.”

In response to “what should we do with old white things?”, Tara wrote, “annotate them and then take them off the top shelf,” and Anh wrote, “fuck them, in all senses of the word.”

From there we each found a time to meet remotely and start a process together. The video included below is a document of those first meetings. With no clear future in sight, both in terms of performance and more generally, these experiments are a means without an end, the beginning of what might be a very slow dance, but perhaps an experiment with some means that might lead to other means.